

Downtown Yerevan is not exactly Washington DC. It is a little bit like Manhattan, just smaller. Rooms with a view often look out onto the neighbors' nine-story Soviet building. Yet, the experience is incomparable.

Often, you are the only one in the building with your skills and background, and the only one able to write a text, meet a

guest, develop a strategy, and carry out a program. That feels good.

That's the kind of challenge few entry-level positions offer. Yet, Armenia, itself in an entry-level position offers hundreds of such opportunities. The AGBU and the Assembly have had the foresight to try to fill this difficult expectation. ■

Clash of Values

The West's patronizing, sometimes arrogant attitude has contributed to the frustration of groups who are tired of transitions



The World Council of Churches (WCC) which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this month (see page 62), has come under strong criticism—particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union—by high ranking leaders of the Orthodox churches that follow the Byzantine tradition. Among them, Russian Patriarch Alexei II has warned that the continued participation of the Russian Orthodox Church in WCC will depend on the organization's "total reconstruction." The Russian Orthodox Church is the biggest in the WCC's 332 mainly Protestant (and leading Orthodox) member churches. The Georgian Orthodox Church has already withdrawn its membership and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is expected to withdraw this month.

In accordance with their theological and dogmatic traditions, many Orthodox leaders have described the WCC's activities as too Protestant, and too heavily influenced by what they believe to be a liberal Western agenda. They claim that theological teachings and moral injunctions have been discarded by a number of Protestant churches which seemingly impose their "altered principles" on other WCC members. WCC's overall unity is further threatened by the campaign of many ultra conservatives within the Byzantine Orthodox churches who advocate that all ties with ecumenical bodies should be cut. More moderate circles have preferred a policy of constructive criticism over complete secession. The West's patronizing, at times arrogant, we-know-and-do-better attitude toward the East and the South has also contributed to the frustration of groups who are tired of "transitions" in their societies.

While WCC is undergoing a restructuring process to make the organization more efficient and its operations more transparent, the protracted dispute among member churches over "right faith" and "right practice" point to several significant developments.

During the Cold War, membership in the multinational church organization provided legitimacy and respite to churches which were under constant pressure behind the Iron Curtain. To many, the WCC provided their only link to the outside world. Theological and dogmatic differences were overlooked or toler-

ated in return for the recognition and institutional legitimacy that WCC membership granted.

However, when the floodgates of pluralism opened after the collapse of communism, national churches faced one of the greatest challenges of their institutional life: the influx of new religious movements—as cults and western-based Evangelical groups are politely called. What was a matter of theological differences among Christians, became a matter of "national security" in the former Soviet space—the preservation of the "authentic" religious and moral identity of the nation. Another dimension of this process is the jurisdictional and religious territorial disputes among, for example, the Russian Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches. (Russian Patriarch Alexei has repeatedly refused to meet Pope John Paul II until Ukraine's revived Greek Catholic church ceases its "disgraceful discrimination and persecution" of Orthodox Christians). Such disputes were unthinkable a mere decade ago when the state dictated every aspect of secular and religious life.

The political and physical liberation of national churches from the claws of the state has been a mixed blessing. On the one hand they have been accorded freedom and legal privileges to conduct their ministry, on the other hand, as centuries-old national institutions, they have been left to compete for souls with smaller, and largely foreign, denominations and religious groups.

Like other multinational organizations (UN, OSCE, CIS), the WCC in general and national churches in particular are challenged to take a look in the global mirror. While globalization of the economy, mass media and technology may have many positive affects, the "globalization of problems," as renown theologian Hans Kung puts it, calls for "global ethics," a necessary "minimum of values." But who shall decide? There is always room for specialists or interest groups to fight over dogmas and anachronistic issues, but reading the "signs of the times" in our shrinking world seems more of an urgent matter for the spiritual and moral well-being of society than asserting and reenforcing differences. ■